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Li Guo, *The Performing Arts in Medieval Islam: Shadow Play and Popular Poetry in Ibn Dāniyāl's Mamluk Cairo*. Islamic History and Civilization: Studies and Texts, vol. 93 (Leiden: Brill, 2012). Pp. xiii + 240.

Also mentioned here:

Theatre from Medieval Cairo: The Ibn Dāniyāl Trilogy. Translated and edited by Safi Mahfouz and Marvin Carlson. (New York: Martin E. Segal Theatre Center, 2013). Pp. xxvi + 197.

Reviewed by Adam Talib, The American University in Cairo

Li Guo's study of the life and works of Ibn Dāniyāl (1248–1310), the most famous classical Arabic dramatist, is a worthy and important contribution to the history of Arabic literature, as well as the social and cultural history of the Mamluk empire. Guo divides his study into three parts: the life and times of Ibn Dāniyāl (Part One), the history, style, and artistry of Arabic shadow plays (Part Two), and an English translation of one of Ibn Dāniyāl's surviving plays, *Ṭayf al-Khayāl*, rendered as *The Phantom* (Part Three). Behind each of these sleek and polished sections lies years of sustained and arduous philological research. Although Part One is focused primarily on Ibn Dāniyāl's biography, Guo brings in a considerable amount of literary evidence from Ibn Dāniyāl's plays and collected poems to enrich what could have been a one-dimensional representation. Part One is itself divided into three "acts." Such an approach will always provoke the methodological allergies of historians and students of literature respectively, but provided that both author and reader have matured past the stage of fetishizing positivism, it can allow for an engaging and illuminating discussion of historical actors who, in contemporary and near-contemporary accounts, are already presented as quasi-literary characters.

In this regard, Part One should be understood as Guo's reconstruction of the historical Ibn Dāniyāl with the acknowledged help of the man's literary works (see, e.g., p. 46: speculations about his family life). Here, too, Guo should be lauded for his frank discussion of misogamy and bisexuality in the work of Ibn Dāniyāl (pp. 148–51) as well as his entertaining use of gay slang in the translations of Ibn Dāniyāl's poetry. Although scholars are accustomed to finding such themes in classical Arabic poetry, it is important that we stop and consider what these may actually mean in the context in which they are presented. Personally, I am not convinced that "bisexuality" is the most appropriate way of describing the sexual attitudes presented in Ibn Dāniyāl's poetry, but it is refreshing to see a serious discussion of a complex, if common, phenomenon that is often disregarded. This literary-biographical approach is, in practice, very common among scholars of

classical Arabic literature but few manage to pull it off with such style and self-awareness. It is not entirely without its missteps, however, as sentiments like “... Mamluk literary patronage was a business arrangement made between the patron and the poet” (p. 43) do not pass muster as either historical biography or literary history. I also find it peculiar that someone with as little patience for the *nasīb* as Guo seems to have (see pp. 37, 42, 71) should have devoted so many years to studying classical Arabic poetry.

Parts Two and Three treat the medieval Islamicate performing arts of the title. Part Two is both a state-of-the-art of Arabic shadow plays as well as a survey of Ibn Dāniyāl’s theatrical production. Indeed were it not for Guo’s detailed explication of the stylistic and generic features of Ibn Dāniyāl’s plays in Part Two, it would be very difficult to follow the translation of *Ṭayf al-Khayāl* in Part Three. The translation of *Ṭayf al-Khayāl* is readable, entertaining, and well annotated. It also gives a good idea of the bawdy tenor of Arabic popular culture in the Mamluk period. Faults in the translation are surely due to the poor status of the text rather than any shortcoming of the translator.

It is astonishing that Guo has been able to synthesize such complex and dense material into a remarkably readable and informative discussion, and in doing so has led the way for further research by Arabists as well as non-Arabist theater historians. It is significant, too, that Guo was able to incorporate new readings from the manuscripts available to him in this study (notably Ayasofya MS 4880-1). In two appendices, which researchers are bound to find essential, Guo details the manuscripts and printed sources of Ibn Dāniyāl’s work. Of course, anyone who reads this book (or indeed this review) should bear it in mind that Ibn Dāniyāl’s language is notoriously difficult. In fact, while reading Guo’s book one is first filled with gratitude to the author followed by deep frustration that a more critical edition of Ibn Dāniyāl’s plays and poems does not yet exist. That frustration has festered for at least two decades by now, however, as even a cursory glance at reviews of the Kahle edition attests. I mention only in passing here that Amr Moneer of South Valley University (Qena, Egypt) is said to be planning a new edition of Ibn Dāniyāl’s *Ṭayf al-Khayāl*.

In the hope that a more reliable edition will not be too long in coming, I offer a few emendations here for the benefit of readers and researchers. As befits a long anticipated study such as this one, Guo’s book has already attracted the attention of competent reviewers like Emily Selove and Geert Jan van Gelder (writing in the *Journal of Islamic Studies* and the *Journal of the American Oriental Society* respectively) so I will avoid being redundant in my comments. Having said that, I must say that while van Gelder is correct in pointing out in his review that Guo’s vocalization of *Ḥabīzā* (pp. 118, 205–6) is clearly incorrect, his suggestions (*jabīzī*: “my dry bread,” *khabīzī*: “my baked bread”) are altogether less likely than

a toddler pronouncing the more common word *ḥabībī* as *ḥabīzī*. In the same passage, Guo fails to recognize the baby-talk [or child-directed language] word *mum/mamma* (“food”). The other incomprehensible word in that line, *b-f-ā*, is perhaps related to another baby-talk word: *buff*, “bread.”¹

Occasionally, it is the mixing of Persian words (or the perceived mixing of Persian words) that causes difficulty. For example on p. 82, Guo is too trusting of the editor of Ibn Dāniyāl’s poetry collection, M. N. al-Dulaymī, who explains erroneously (*Mukhtār*, p. 144 n. 146) that a Persian character in one of Ibn Dāniyāl’s works is saying, “*yā ānjā*” (nonsense in Persian) when it is clear from the printed text itself that the character is saying, “Come here!” (*biyā [ī]njā*). It is worth noting here that al-Dulaymī’s edition is full of errors, which Guo occasionally replicates in translation. Elsewhere (p. 120), Guo believes that the Arabic *sarqīn* (attested as Arabized Persian in Steingass) is the “Egyptianized” form of the Persian *sarjīn*, which of course does not exist; the Persian word is *sargīn* with *gāf* (a phoneme that does not occur in Standard Arabic). There is a fair bit of Persian in Ibn Dāniyāl’s poetry, of course, just as one finds in the work of other Iraqi poets like Abū Nuwās and Ibn al-Ḥajjāj. Guo finds the use of Persian words as technical vocabulary in the game of backgammon remarkable (p. 119), but these, mostly numerical terms, are of course still used in Cairo today. I confess that I am not satisfied with the translation of the verses on p. 119. Unfortunately, the reproduction of the Dār al-Kutub (Cairo) copy of the MS that I have access to is missing the second half of this poem and it is not clear whether Guo is emending his reading of the printed *dīwān* (based on the Dār al-Kutub MS) with another manuscript in his possession. *Yakay* cannot mean “one-one” in either Arabic (*yakān/yakayn*, *yakkān/yakkayn*) or Persian (*yak-yak*); I can think of two more probable interpretations: *aṣḥaḥtu yak-kan* could mean “I got stuck in the first point on the board” or perhaps “I rolled a one.” The word *shāsishī* is not comprehensible to me; Guo suggests that it is a corruption of *shash-sih* (six-three) while al-Dulaymī reads it as six. Both are possible, but I would have expected *sih-shash* (three-six) in Persian. In either case, I believe the hemistich can be better interpreted as “I got stuck in the first point [on the board] when I was defeated by a six-three [or six].” In the second verse, I would interpret *al-sha’ir* as “the other die” not a Persian adverb with the Arabic definite prefix—*dūwī* thus meaning “a two” not “two-two”; likewise *arsh* is an attested Arabic word.

Occasionally, Guo’s translations exaggerate Ibn Dāniyāl’s ribaldry—as if that were necessary! Is this the academic equivalent of the zeal of the converted? I do not know, but the Persian expression *kāse dāghatar az āsh* comes to mind. The description “whose shadow is the pubic hair at its base” (p. 169) is simply a misren-

¹ See Charles A. Ferguson, “Arabic Baby Talk,” in *Structuralist Studies in Arabic Linguistics: Charles A. Ferguson’s Papers, 1954–1994*, ed. R. Kirk Belknap and Niloofar Haeri (Leiden, 1997), 184.

dering of “from behind, his shadow is [the width] of a single hair,” i.e., the boy is lithe. Also the expression *abghā min al-ibrah* cannot mean “who could also screw like a needle” as Guo would have it (p. 88). In fact, it is a common enough expression, which Geert Jan van Gelder and I were able to find in al-Hamadhānī’s *Al-Maqāmah al-Dīnārīyah* and al-‘Askarī’s *Jamharat al-Amthāl*. Muḥammad ‘Abduh explains the expression thus: “A needle is for poking and pricking so someone who is like a needle is a person who is obnoxious and injurious to people. Perhaps it comes from a young woman who fornicates because some thread remains inside the eye of the needle” (p. 221). Following ‘Abduh’s first gloss, W. J. Prendergast translates the expression as “O more rebellious than a needle!” (p. 166) as does Marina Montanaro “più ribelle di un ago” (2:110). Unfortunately, al-‘Askarī writes that the expression *abghā min ibrah* is one of the new coinages (*amthāl muwalladah*) that he did not include in his collection as he found them ugly (*lam tuthbat fī al-tarjamah li-qubḥ al-fāzihā*), but that the meaning is well known (*ma’rūf*) (1:206). I cannot think of any one characteristic that links the second items in the construction (*abghā min*), which al-‘Askarī lists: needle, hatchet, padlock, and jawbone, but the expression is clearly negative. In the context of Ibn Dāniyāl’s poem, I presume it must be related to the specific sexual desire (*ubnah*) mentioned in the preceding hemistich. Perhaps, then, provisionally the expression could be understood as “a stubborn and intractable desire” to, in this case, be anally penetrated. On the same page (88), the word *mushāshāhu* likely refers to the two soft mud banks of the canal, rather than the Devil’s “body and soul.” In the list of character names (“The Art of Name-Calling,” pp. 123–30), it is strange not to see reference to the work of Jacqueline Sublet (“Nom écrit, nom dit,” *Arabica* 44, no. 4 [1997]: 545–52). In that article, one occasionally finds better renditions of the characters’ names: e.g., Ḥassūn al-Mawzūn: “Chardonneret *l’Equilibriste*” (Gold-finch the acrobat); ‘Usaylah: I find “Petite goutte de miel” (honey-drop) more plausible than Guo’s “Perfumer’s Little Broom”; Abū al-‘Ajab: is better rendered as “Celui qui fait des merveilles” (Miracle-Man) than “Father of the Wonder Boy.” Both Sublet and Guo translate the epithet “al-Sharmāt” (*pace* Sublet: “al-Sarmāt”) as the amulet-maker, which is not incorrect, but I would translate the word as “Ripper” or “Tatter-er.” The name Zagħbar, which Sublet translates as “Chenu” (Hoary) and Guo tentatively renders as “Dusty Shred,” simply means “Fluff.” Guo takes the name of the priest character Marra Qird to mean “Monkey-passing,” whereas I think it more likely a joke on the word *mār* (the honorific title of saints). These minor quibbles aside, Guo’s achievement is significant and indeed I hope it will be transformative.

As an aside, I would like to point readers to a volume of translations that appeared shortly after Guo’s monograph. Safi Mahfouz, chair of the department of English Language and Literature at UNRWA University (Amman), and Mar-

vin Carlson, Sidney E. Cohn Professor of Theatre, Comparative Literature, and Middle East Studies at the CUNY Graduate Center, have together translated all three of Ibn Dāniyāl's extant plays. Theirs is a practical translation—indeed the plays were given a reading in New York on 8 April, 2013—and it is the first complete translation of Ibn Dāniyāl's plays into English. The plays have already been translated into Italian (F. Corrao) and French (R. Khawam). The translators acknowledge their debt to these translators, as well as Li Guo, in the preface to their collection, *Theatre from Medieval Cairo*. I do not believe it is practicable to review these translations closely because, as I have previously mentioned, the Arabic text on which they are based is not satisfactory, but the translations are readable and the translators provide helpful notes and explanations for non-Arabist readers. Teachers of classical Arabic literature or world theater will find these texts useful for teaching and performance, provided that they work in institutions less prudish than my own.

In addition to Guo's exceptional study and the other studies cited therein, readers may like to peruse studies by Marcus Milwright (*Muqarnas* 28 [2011]: 43–68), Muṣṭafá Abū al-ʿAlā' (*Muḥammad b. Dāniyāl al-Mawṣilī: Dirāsah Mawḍūʿīyah wa-Fannīyah* [Alexandria, 2002]), Dror Ze'evi (*Producing Desire*, Chapter 5), and the work of Ra'ed Abdel Raheem (see several issues of *Majallat Jāmi'at al-Najāh lil-Abḥāth: al-ʿUlūm al-Insānīyah*) and his student Taghreed W. M. Koni (M.A. thesis, al-Najah National University, Palestine, 2013).

Miscellaneous errata: *ballīq* read *bullayq* (p. 118). Ibn al-Hubbārīya read Ibn al-Habbārīya (p. 148). On p. 149, Guo's emendation of the printed text is unnecessary: *buzāl*, the bung-hole of a wine cask, is the preferred reading, but is not an allusion to another sex act. Rather the persona is saying that because he experiences no "lust" (*shabaq*) toward his wife, he has to get drunk to have sex with her.